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ABSTRACT

This report presents case studies of six children (ages 9-10) at high risk for mild intellectual disability who were attending six different regular education primary schools in the greater Auckland, New Zealand, metropolitan area. The children were experiencing major academic difficulties and had made limited academic progress in the 6- to 7-month period prior to the study. Each of the six subjects were observed in the classroom and in the playground for an entire school day and during a two-hour second visit. A continuous record was kept of all classroom and playground academic activities/interactions, together with details of academic work undertaken. Each of the students in the subjects' classes (including the subjects) was administered a sociometric peer-rating scale and interviews were held with the subjects, their teachers/teacher-aides, and their parents. Results indicate that while the teachers in each of the classrooms were aware of the children's special educational needs and had attempted to modify their programs to provide individualized instruction, none of the children were receiving an educational program that appeared to come anywhere near to accommodating their perceived special educational needs. All six children were making poor academic progress and five were poorly accepted socially by their classmates. (Contains 16 references.) (CR)

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# Children at high-risk for mild intellectual disability in regular classrooms : Six New Zealand case-studies

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**Abstract**

A set of six case-studies was undertaken - each focusing on a particular primary school in the greater metropolitan area of Auckland, New Zealand. In each school a child at high-risk for mild intellectual disability had been identified via screening procedures. While the teachers in each of the children's classrooms seemed clearly aware of the children's special educational needs and had attempted to modify their programmes to provide individualised instruction for the high-risk children, none of the children were receiving an educational program that appeared to come anywhere near to accommodating their perceived special educational needs. All six children were making very poor academic progress, and five of the six children were also poorly accepted socially by their classmates. Both teachers and parents were very concerned about the children's lack of progress. The results are discussed in terms of current New Zealand special educational policies and resourcing procedures, and the likelihood that many New Zealand children with mild intellectual disability may not be receiving an appropriate special education within current inclusive programs.

**Children at high-risk for mild intellectual disability in regular classrooms: Six New Zealand case-studies**

Over the past two decades, a special educational policy preference for mainstreaming/ integration/ inclusion for children with intellectual disability has been instituted in most Western countries, and much debate and a sizeable body of research has focused on issues which underpin such policies. As far as the education of children with mild intellectual disability is concerned, there already was an extensive corpus of research into the efficacy of special class provisions (Kirk, 1964; Semmel, Gottlieb & Robinson, 1979) - much of this virtually uninterpretable because of a variety of methodological problems (Wilton, 1988). During the 1980's, a number of studies provided empirical confirmation of the point documented earlier by Goldstein, Moss & Jordan (1965) that special class attendance is likely to yield greater benefits for children with mild intellectual disability than is continued regular class attendance without individualised special educational help (Madden & Slavin, 1983). As Semmel and his co-workers (e.g., Semmel, Gerber & MacMillan, 1994; Semmel, Lieber & Peck, 1986) have noted however, research in this area to date has focused almost exclusively on experimental environments, and as a result virtually nothing is known about the "natural" environments of extant special educational and regular class provisions being made for children with mild intellectual disability. From this perspective, there is an urgent need to try to describe, categorise, and ultimately to understand the elements of the natural environments in which children with mild intellectual disability are currently being educated - especially as these characteristics relate to the academic and social development of the children concerned. This situation certainly applies to New Zealand, where at present virtually nothing is known about the natural special educational (or other) classroom environments of children with mild intellectual disability.

Over the past 80 years, the special education of children with mild intellectual disability in New Zealand has followed a similar course to that developed in North America. Beginning in 1917, special classes were established in New Zealand primary (years 1-6) schools - and later in intermediate schools (years 7 & 8), and in 1962 facilities were also instituted in secondary schools (experience classes). Throughout the 1970's and 1980's, approximately 3,500-4,000

children with mild intellectual disability were receiving special education via special classes in any one year (close to 0.60% of the school population). For the past few years, however, the number of special class students has been considerably less than this figure (although the total school population has not reduced), and is currently just above 2,400 students (Ministry of Education, 1995). Accordingly, it is highly probable that many children with mild intellectual disability who would formerly have attended a special class, are now continuing their education in regular classes.

It also needs to be noted that the actual number of children with mild intellectual disability who are currently being served via special classes may well be considerably fewer than the current enrolment figure. Formerly, the positive identification of mild intellectual disability was a prerequisite for special class entry, but for some years, the entry criterion has been amended to "very low all-round achievement". Consequently, a number of children with a learning disability of some sort - other than mild intellectual disability, would almost certainly be included within the current official figure.

In 1988, a special educational policy change to "mainstreaming" was introduced in New Zealand (Department of Education, 1988), and this has undoubtedly had a major influence on the education of children with disability - including those with mild intellectual disability. The policy advocated that as far as possible, children with disabilities would be educated with their non-disabled age-mates, and for most children with mild intellectual disability, this would mean education within regular classrooms. Subsequently the Education Act underwent a major revision (Education Act, 1989) thus providing all children - including those with disabilities, with the right to be educated in their local school, if this was the wish of their parents. Subsequently, resourcing procedures have been developed to provide support for schools who wish to (or may be legally required to) provide special educational help in their school for a child with a disability.

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The model of special education service delivery which is currently very widespread throughout New Zealand for a large number of children - within a variety of disability groups, is the individualised educational programme (IEP) delivered in regular (mainstream) classes. Such programmes are generally developed in consultation between a child's parents and the school, and support for the teacher of the child concerned is usually provided by a teacher-aide (typically an untrained teacher). Some children in regular classes also receive help through special education resource teachers. At the time of the study, there were close to 2,000 such children - some of whom would have been children with mild intellectual disability. Special education discretionary assistance (SEDA) funding is also currently made available (by the Ministry of Education) on a case-by-case basis to schools which have children with special educational needs, following a recommendation by an educational psychologist attached to the Special Education Service (SES) - a crown agency which contracts with the New Zealand Ministry of Education to provide educational psychologists and other support/guidance services to schools (Wilton, 1994). The funding is provided to enable schools to employ teacher-aides to support teachers of children with established special educational needs (i.e., established by psychological assessment) in regular classrooms. The amount of funding made available to the school from this source varies considerably from child to child, but for children with mild intellectual disability, sufficient funding for approximately 3-5 hours per week of teacher-aide time would not be uncommon. The amount of funding in this area is necessarily limited, and referral to the SES is a prerequisite for funding. There could thus well be (indeed there are likely to be) many children with disabilities who require special educational help for which government funding is currently unavailable. For these children, any special educational help they receive would need to be funded directly by their school (through money raised in the community by the school), and in the absence of such funds, special educational help would be unavailable.

As mentioned earlier, little is currently known about the situation of children with mild intellectual disability in New Zealand schools. Some of the children who would formerly have attended a special class could be expected to be receiving special educational help via IEP's in regular classrooms. Mention has already been made of the fact that the positive identification of

mild intellectual disability is no longer a criterion for special class admission. Since essentially the same criteria are employed for providing access to an IEP with teacher-aide funding for children who would otherwise gain admission to a special class, however, it is not possible to determine the actual number of New Zealand children with mild intellectual disability who are currently receiving special educational help via IEP's in regular classrooms. Likewise, the number who are attending regular classes but not receiving any special educational help is not presently known. It seems likely that the actual prevalence of mild intellectual disability in New Zealand would be close to that found in the United States - i.e., close to 2 percent of the school population. In a previous survey (Cooper, Wilton & Glynn, 1985) of 312 primary school teachers, it was found that nearly 3 percent of the children in each of the teachers' classes were believed (by the children's teachers) to have a mild intellectual disability - and to be in need of special educational help. It thus seems probable that there are indeed very many New Zealand children with mild intellectual disability who are currently attending regular classrooms in New Zealand schools, and are in need of special education.

The present exploratory study was undertaken in attempt to shed some light on current provisions for New Zealand children within this disability group who are in regular classrooms. Specifically, an attempt was made to ascertain the nature and quality of "mainstream/inclusive" provisions being made for a small group of primary school children at high-risk for mild intellectual disability. A survey was made of a random sample of schools in several particular areas of metropolitan Auckland, and a group of children at high-risk for mild intellectual disability was identified. Data were gathered on the children's academic achievement and social acceptance, and detailed observations were made of the children's classroom and playground activities. Interviews were also held with the teachers and parents of the children, and with the children themselves.

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## Method

### Subjects

The subjects were six children (5 boys & 1 girl) within the age-range 9 - 10 ½ years, who were attending six different primary (elementary) schools in the greater Auckland metropolitan area. Each of the children was experiencing major academic difficulties and had made limited academic progress in the 6-7 months period prior to the study. Each subject had been administered the Standard Progressive Matrices ( Raven, 1977), and had scored at or below the third percentile for their age-group according to recent New Zealand norms (NZCER, 1984), and were thus regarded as being at high-risk for mild intellectual disability. The children were: Case 1 "Alan" - aged 10 years; Case 2 "Bob" -aged 10 ½ years; Case 3 "Carl" - aged 9 years; Case 4 "Donna" - aged 9 years; Case 5 "Edward"- aged 9 years; and Case 6 "Fred" - aged 10 ½ years.

### Procedure

A sample of 15 schools were contacted and invited to participate in the study. These schools had been sampled at random from two lower socio-economic status areas of Auckland city, and each school was subsequently visited by the first author. Eight of the schools believed that they had children within Grade 3-4 classes (4$^{th}$ & 5$^{th}$ years of schooling) who appeared to be "very slow learners", and all agreed to participate in the study. The parents of these children (total N=40) were contacted by the first author, and their permission for their child's participation in the study was sought. All of the parents contacted readily agreed, and the children were subsequently administered the Standard Progressive Matrices. A total of six children met the selection criterion for high-risk for mild intellectual disability (a total score at or below the 3$^{rd}$ percentile for their age-group).

Data on the subjects' academic achievement and school progress over the previous 6-7 months, were gathered from school records. Each of the six subjects was subsequently observed in the classroom and in the playground for an entire school day. A continuous narrative record was kept of all of their classroom and playground academic activities/ interactions, together with details of all academic work undertaken. A second visit was made to each of the subjects'

classrooms approximately two weeks later, and a further two hours observation of classroom and playground activities/ interactions was undertaken. In all cases, the data from the second visit corresponded very closely with the information obtained from the initial (1-day) visit. Each of the students in the subjects' classes (including the subjects) was administered a sociometric peer-rating scale. The children were required to rate each of their fellow-students on a 4 point scale indicating the extent they would like to a) play with, and b) work with them (4= very much, 3= a little, 2= not much, 1=not at all). In addition, interviews were held with each of the subjects, their teachers/teacher-aides, and their parents.

**Results of Case-studies**

**Case 1 - "Alan"**. Alan was a 10-year-old boy who was in Grade 5 (year 6) in a class of 20 students. His reading achievement at the time of the study was below Grade 1 level, and his maths achievement was also at this level. He had not been referred to the Special Education Service for special educational consideration, although his teacher believed that he had major special educational needs. He worked with his class-mates in all areas of the classroom program, but during the entire school day Alan did not receive any individualised **instructional** time. His teacher, who had not had any previous special educational training or experience, believed that his current program had achieved a moderate degree of success (in the preceding 7 months), but she also believed that many of Alan's needs were not being effectively met with current resources. She was hopeful that it would be possible to obtain teacher-aide hours for him in the near future. She also believed that Alan had achieved moderate social acceptance from his class-mates, but sociometric data revealed that his social acceptance was actually very poor (although Alan did not appear to be aware of this). Alan's guardian was very concerned about his lack of academic progress and wanted more special educational help for him.

**Case 2 - "Bob"**. Bob was a 10 ½ year-old-boy who was in a Grade 5 class of 33 students. At the time of the study, his reading achievement and maths achievement were both below Grade 1 level. Bob had been referred to the Special Education Service for special educational

consideration, and was receiving individualised help in maths from a teacher-aide for approximately 30 minutes per day, and participated in a school-based "reading resource" program - along with 15 other children in the school. For the reminder of the school day, however, he worked with his class-mates on the regular Grade 5 class program. Bob's teacher had had no previous special educational training or experience. She believed that his progress over the previous seven months had been minimal, and that much more extensive special educational help was required for him - a view shared very strongly by Bob's parents. His social acceptance was noticeably poor - although he believed that it was "good".

**Case 3 - "Carl"**. Carl was a 9-year-old boy who was in his second year in a Grade 3 class of 28 students. His reading and maths achievement were both substantially below Grade 1 level, but he had never been referred to the Special Education Service for special educational consideration. His teacher had not had any previous training or experience in special education. Carl had been provided with help in reading via an itinerant support teacher for approximately four hours per week, together with teacher-aide support (a certificated teacher funded directly by the school) for approximately five hours per week. The teacher herself did not believe that the current programs in reading and maths had been effective in meeting Carl's special educational needs, and she was strongly of the view that his program in both of these areas needed to be changed substantially. Carl's social acceptance was noticeably poor, and although this was not evident in his classroom behaviour (or that of his class-mates), it was clearly apparent in his play behaviour during recess periods in that he was observed to play exclusively with considerably younger children. Carl's parents were both very concerned about his lack of progress, and wanted increased special educational help for him.

**Case 4 - "Donna"**. Donna was a 9-year-old girl in a Grade 3 classroom of 29 students. Her reading and maths achievement were both substantially below Grade 1 level. Donna had been referred to the Special Education Service for special educational help, and was receiving approximately 30 minutes per day of Special Education Service-funded teacher-aide support during reading/written language activities. Her teacher had not had any previous special

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education training or experience. She believed that the current level of teacher-aide time was inadequate, and needed to be increased considerably. The school was unable to fund such an increase directly, and additional funding from the Special Education Service was not available. Donna believed that she was well accepted by her class-mates, but her social acceptance was actually very poor. Her mother was very concerned about Donna's lack of progress, and believed that much greater efforts on the part of the school were both essential and urgent.

**Case 5 - "Edward"**. Edward was a 9-year-old boy in a Grade 4 classroom of 34 students. His reading achievement was at the upper-Grade 2 level based on lower-order decoding - but considerably below this on comprehension, and his maths achievement was well below Grade 1 level. Edward had not been referred to the Special Education Service for special educational help, but during the first half of the school year he had first been given teacher-aide support in the regular classroom in both reading and maths, and subsequently an IEP had been formulated by the teacher of the satellite class (a special class for children with moderate/severe intellectual disability) in the school - to be implemented by the regular class teacher. Both of these strategies had been regarded by the teacher as unsuccessful, and at the time of the study he was receiving programs in both reading and maths in the satellite classroom. Since the initiation of these programs, his teacher had found it very difficult to monitor his progress. She believed that he was not making good progress, however, and was generally concerned about this state of affairs. Edward was not accepted socially by his class-mates, and during recesses he spent most of his time with children from the satellite class. His mother was very concerned about his current program and about his association with (& possible identification with) the children with moderate/severe intellectual disability from the satellite class.

**Case 6 - "Fred"**. Fred was a 10 ½-year-old boy who was in his second year in Grade 5, in a class of 31 children. His reading and maths achievement were both at Grade 1 level. He had been referred to the Special Education Service for special educational help, and one hour per day of teacher-aide support during reading had been allocated to the classroom to be shared between Fred and two other children. His teacher was concerned about his lack of progress. At the same

time, she believed that the current programme of teacher-aide support had been helpful in providing some relief from Fred's demands for attention from her (i.e., the class teacher). Fred appeared to be reasonably well accepted socially by his class-mates. His mother was concerned about his limited academic progress, and about his social acceptance, noting that he never seemed to be invited to other children's homes, and never brought friends home to play after school or on weekends.

## Discussion

All of the above six children were involved in "inclusive" educational programs in regular classrooms, but none of the six children appeared to have made any real progress in reading or maths in the seven months preceding the study. Only Fred appeared to be well accepted socially by his class-mates, and even here his mother had noted that his contact with class-mates out of school was essentially zero. All of the children had identifiable special educational needs, but in the view of their teachers, these were conspicuously not being met. The programs for the three children who had been referred to the Special Education Service and were receiving SES-funded teacher-aide help, did not seem to be meeting the children's special educational needs - and in this respect did not differ noticeably from those being offered to the other three children. In other words, in four of the six cases, teacher-aide support in the regular classroom had been regarded as "the strategy of choice" for accommodating the children's special educational needs. This strategy had also been employed for one of the remaining children (but had subsequently been discontinued in favour of a pull-out resource-room program in a satellite class), while the remaining child was receiving no additional help beyond that provided by the regular class teacher. None of the children whose teachers were receiving (or had received) teacher-aide support were showing discernible academic progress. Consequently, teacher-aide support as provided for the teachers in these classrooms, did not appear to have resulted in programs which yielded academic progress for the children concerned.

All of the teacher-aide support programs entailed 1:1 interaction with the child, but in none of the four cases where it was observed, did this interaction include instructional activity or

"academic learning time" (Gage & Berliner, 1992). Almost all of the time the children spent with teacher-aides entailed completing activities provided by the teacher, and seldom if ever did instruction per se occur. Moreover, the children worked on material which was already very well understood by them - and few if any new skills/concepts seemed likely to result from these sessions. While all of the teachers were concerned about the children's lack of progress, none had had any special educational training or experience. Moreover, none appeared to be monitoring systematically the outcomes of the children's classroom support activities - and in two cases (Bob & Carl) the teachers held low expectations for the current support strategies. The parents were all concerned about their children's lack of progress at school, and all believed that a substantial increase in special educational help was required. None of the teachers or parents seemed enthusiastic about transfer of the children to a special class - in another school. The case-study data strongly indicate that all of the children had special educational needs which were not being met in their current classroom situations. The data seem very reminiscent of those obtained by Baker and Zigmond (1995) in their recent studies of inclusive educational programs in the United States for children with learning disabilities. In a general sense, the children in the present study could be said to be obtaining a "reasonable" **regular** education - and it was apparent that their teachers (& fellow staff) had gone to considerable lengths to offer an inclusive educational program for them. As Baker and Zigmond (1995) found, however, none of the children could be said to have been receiving an appropriate **special** education program. Moreover, five of the six children were poorly accepted socially by their class-mates - and in this important respect their inclusive educational programmes seemed noticeably unsuccessful.

It seems probable that all of the children would gain significantly if they were receiving regular and appropriate individualised instruction within their classroom (or alternatively within high quality resource-room provisions in their current schools). The (apparently widespread) use of teacher-aides to undertake the special educational teaching for children with mild intellectual disability in inclusive programs seems unlikely to be an effective strategy - given the complex nature of the children's learning difficulties, and the level of skills/experience likely to be encountered in most teacher-aides. While it is certainly possible - and indeed highly desirable, to

provide training to enhance the teaching skills of teacher-aides, it would seem more crucial to focus most attention on finding ways of utilising teacher-aide support in the classroom so that the **teacher** (or a special education resource teacher) is able to work individually with such children on a regular basis - and to monitor the effectiveness of the programs which are instituted.

The present data underline the point that for educational success with this group, those who work with the children must have a clear understanding of their special educational needs, the teaching skills to work effectively with them in 1:1 teaching situations which yield academic learning, and at the same time a clear and ongoing awareness of the classroom program in which the children with mild intellectual disability have been included. These criteria are certainly demanding and require teachers of considerable quality for their achievement. Well trained **special** education teachers should be able to meet these criteria, and perhaps many if not most regular class teachers could also do so providing they receive: high quality in-service special education training, adequate resources, and adequate support services **and** providing that their classroom activities can be organised in such a way that the child with mild intellectual disability is able to receive regular individualised instruction from the teacher her/himself - or from someone with the very high quality teaching skills which are required for effective special education for this group of children (e.g., special education resource teacher). In this connection, it is interesting to note that all of the teachers in the current study expressed the view that available resources and support-services for their inclusive special educational programs were very inadequate.

The current sample is a small one, and clearly a wider more comprehensive study is required before firm generalisations could be made. Moreover, as far as the "natural environment" of educational provisions for children with mild intellectual disability is concerned, it is important to keep in mind that the current study was concerned with only one segment of this environment - that found in mainstream (inclusive) classrooms. The nature and quality of the learning environments provided for children with mild intellectual disability in special classrooms also need to be examined. Assuming the picture obtained in these six case-studies is characteristic of

inclusive provisions for New Zealand children with mild intellectual disability (as we suspect it is), the assumption which appears to be currently widespread in New Zealand that the provision of teacher-aide support is likely to yield effective special educational contexts for children with mild intellectual disability who are receiving individualised educational programs in regular classrooms, needs to be seriously questioned. Moreover, in our view, the alternative special education strategy of making itinerant specialist teachers and/or resource-room provisions (via adequately trained special education teachers) available on a daily basis to most children with mild intellectual disability in inclusive programs deserves much more serious and urgent consideration than it appears to have received thus far in New Zealand.

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## Footnotes

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